Chapter 11

Lilith

Glossary of Names and Terms

Alphabet of Ben Sira Composed between eighth and eleventh centuries; contains story of birth and education of Ben Sira and the stories he tells in the court of Nebuchadnezzar; includes story of Lilith

Babylonian Exile Also called Babylonian Captivity (587–539 B.C.E.); deportation of Jews to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar

Ben Sira "Prophet" and prodigy; conceived miraculously; may have been a fictional character

Jeremiah Ben Sira's father/grandfather

Kabbalah Writings of Hebrew mystics of the Middle Ages; contributed to the subsequent demonization of Lilith

Lilith Adam's first wife; demonized in Hebrew scripture

Midrash Narrative that comments, interprets, and explores a question about or contradiction in biblical story

Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylonia from 605–562 B.C.E.; known for building the Gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world

Snvi, Snsvi, Smnglof Three angels in charge of medicine; their names on an amulet protect infants from illnesses inflicted by Lilith

Talmud Two Hebrew texts written between 200 C.E. and 500 C.E.

Tanakh Hebrew scripture

Torah Hebrew scripture; comprising of the first five books of the Old Testament

Yahweh Transliteration from the Hebrew YHVH; one of the names for God in the Old Testament

Zohar Kabbalist scripture

Judaism, a monotheistic religion founded by Abraham and Moses, was born in the Middle East approximately 3,700 years ago. Adherents of the religion are called Jews. They worship the one God, known as Yahweh. The sacred scripture of Jews, known as the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh, consists of a collection of books considered to be divinely inspired. The first five books of the Tanakh are called the Torah or the Five Books of Moses. The Tanakh contains descriptions of the early years of Jewish history, the trials and tribulations of the Jewish people, and the laws and rituals that are required of Jews.

Although the Hebrew scripture contains references to gods other than Yahweh, Judaism's basic contribution to religious thought was monotheism. Other gods mentioned in the scripture are portrayed as subordinates of Yahweh. Unlike those gods, the God of Israel claims righteousness, moral authority, justice, and a concern for

the plight of His people while He simultaneously demands total, unequivocal obedience. Furthermore, unlike other gods, Yahweh was not confined to a particular locale—a quality that was to contribute to his power and ubiquitous influence. Yahweh was in all places at all times.

Jews believe that there is only one God and that they are His chosen people. As the descendents of Abraham, they claim a unique relationship with God, a relationship that was to be reflected in their ethical behavior and holiness, and one which was to be held up as an example for others to emulate. Jews believe that Yahweh intervened intermittently in Jewish history, guiding the Jewish people through many trials and tribulations, and providing them with a set of rules to live by, including the Ten Commandments. Yahweh's actions in history are perceived by the Jewish people as a reaffirmation of their unique status as His chosen people: they are punished when they transgress and rewarded when they are righteous and obedient. Their sacred text proclaims that Yahweh establishes a covenant with His chosen people whereby they keep God's laws and live their daily lives in accordance with those laws in exchange for the many privileges they have received and will continue to receive from Him.

Since the fall of the Israelite monarchy in Babylonia in 586 B.C.E. until the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, Jews have been under the jurisdiction of non-Jews. Their forced exile for approximately 70 years in Babylonia during the sixth century B.C.E. constituted a formative event in Jewish consciousness. The expulsion of the Jewish people from Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 C.E. marked the beginning of their diaspora. Their traditions and customs survived through the efforts of their spiritual leaders known as rabbis.

Over the centuries, Judaism has evolved into many different traditions. These range from the ultra-orthodox Jews who strictly adhere to religious laws to reform Jews who interpret their faith and traditions in accordance with living in a modern society and who embrace gender equity in their beliefs and practices. Early Rabbinic Judaism, or the Judaism of the rabbis, was hostile toward women and perceived them as inferior creatures whose position was subordinate to that of men. Consequently, Jewish women were severely limited in their access to the different aspects of Jewish life. They were prohibited from studying the Torah and from participation in the public rituals of the synagogue, their place of worship. Evidence of early rabbinic attitudes toward women can be seen in the Hebrew figure of Lilith whom we encounter in Genesis, the first book of the Torah.

Genesis opens with the story of creation. But rather than presenting one consistent story, there are, in fact, two conflicting versions of creation in the first chapters of Genesis. The first version of creation in Genesis declares the following:

> *Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the*

earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his
image,
in the image of God he created
them;
male and female he created them. (1: 26–27).

The second version of creation contradicts this not only in terms of the sequence of events but also in terms of the creation of the female. Genesis 1 clearly indicates that the animals were created before the first humans and that the first humans (man and woman) were created simultaneously. In Genesis 2, on the other hand, the sequence is reversed: the man is created first, followed by the animals, followed by the woman: "And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man" (Genesis 2:22).

As the subject of much debate, these conflicting versions of creation may be the result of a flawed intertwining of the earlier pre-Exile version of creation with the post-Exile Babylonian account. Early rabbinic commentary, beginning at approximately the tenth century C.E., contains attempts to reconcile the contradictions. Some biblical commentators have interpreted Genesis 1: 26–27 to mean that the first human being was androgynous. Others, however, most notably in Jewish folklore and rabbinic commentary, argue that this passage refers to Adam's first wife, Lilith.

References to Lilith as Eve's predecessor appear in the Talmud and are elaborated on in the midrash and the Kabbalah. The Talmud consists of two texts, written at approximately 200 C.E. and 500 C.E. respectively. Midrash is a narrative that often begins with a question, a crevice, a silence, or a contradiction in a biblical story and projects the story forward while interpreting and commenting on the scripture itself. Although midrash plays a contributing role in the perception of Lilith, the group primarily credited with her development and transformation appears many centuries after the Talmud. This group is the Kabbalistic mystics—literate, spiritual seekers of the Middle Ages. They transform Lilith from a female endowed with overpowering physical and intellectual abilities to a "scraggy-toothed hag." It is in the Zohar, the scripture of the Kabbalists, that Lilith becomes the harlot, the demon, the embodiment of darkness and evil.

Rabbinic and Kabbalistic sources present an image of Lilith designed to instill fear and loathing. As Adam's first wife, she is at once an evil, fiery spirit who seduces men in their sleep. Some sources describe her as frigid and childless while others claim that she is prodigiously fertile, giving birth to at least 100 demons a day. Blamed for the death of infants, her attributes are designed to reinforce her demonic qualities—a wild-haired and winged creature with an overtly voracious sexual appetite. As a complex figure, Lilith is frequently perceived in contradictory and conflicted ways. The body of literature surrounding her emphasizes her cosmic

nature, the essential role she played in the creation process, her demonic qualities, and her strong association with sexuality and death.

A full-length retelling of the story of Lilith appears in the midrash *The Alphabet of Ben Sira,* an anonymous work of the medieval period. The approximate dates for the *Alphabet* range anywhere from the eighth to the eleventh centuries, C.E. An examination of internal textual evidence has led some scholars to conclude that the *Alphabet* was probably composed in a Muslim country.

The tone of the *Alphabet* is irreverent and much of the humor is scatological. References to animal behavior, human body parts, bodily functions, sexual activity, blatant vulgarities, obscenities, and absurdities have led commentators to conclude that the work may have been a form of an academic burlesque, a parody of sacred materials and commentary that served as an entertaining distraction for rabbinic scholars. However, in some circles, the *Alphabet* enjoyed respect and its contents were, and continue to be, taken seriously.

The *Alphabet* is generally preceded by a narrative of the extraordinary conception, birth, and early education of Ben Sira, "a prophet." Ben Sira's miraculous birth from a virgin signifies his exceptional status. The introduction to the *Alphabet* narrates the unusual manner of his conception. His mother, the virgin daughter of Jeremiah, is impregnated in the bathhouse by her own father's semen after the men of Ephraim threaten to sodomize him unless he masturbates. Because he is a righteous man, Jeremiah's spilled semen is preserved until it enters his daughter's vagina and impregnates her. She gives birth seven months later to Ben Sira: an exceptional infant endowed at birth with a full set of teeth and the power of speech.

While still in his infancy, Ben Sira dialogues with his mother. This may be evidence of an Islamic influence since an infant endowed with the power of speech echoes Surah 19 of the *Qur'an* in which the baby Jesus speaks from his cradle. Ben Sira cites passages from the Hebrew scripture, compares himself to his father, announces his prophethood, and predicts the composition of his alphabet book. During the first year of his life, his mother supports his penchant for "fatty meat and aged wine" by becoming a seamstress.

At the end of his first year, Ben Sira insists on learning the Torah at the synagogue. Met with initial opposition because of his young age, (the teacher cites a passage from the scripture that declares a child must be at least five years old to learn the Torah), Ben Sira counteracts by citing a different passage from the scripture that declares time is running short and there is still much to be done. After being challenged in this way, the teacher begins the lesson by asking Ben Sira to repeat the letters of the alphabet. Ben Sira's response to each letter with a brief aphorism constitutes the first part of the *Alphabet.* There are twenty-two aphorisms in all, arranged alphabetically and organized into a loose narrative framework.

In keeping with his extraordinary conception and birth, Ben Sira demonstrates prodigious learning abilities. By the age of seven, he has mastered a variety of sacred texts and their scholarly interpretations; the different languages spoken by

lm trees, angels, and demons; and a wealth of knowledge in major and minor sub-
cts. His fame quickly spreads throughout the world until King Nebuchadnezzar of
abylon invites him to live in his court as his advisor and guide.

The second part of the *Alphabet* takes place in the court of Nebuchadnezzar. It
nsists of a series of twenty-two episodes that narrate the experiences and stories
Ben Sira in the court. Nebuchadnezzar poses various questions and ordeals to
st Ben Sira who responds to each challenge with a story. It is in this part of the
phabet, in Ben Sira's fifth response to Nebuchadnezzar, that the story of Lilith
pears.

Chapter 5 of the *Alphabet* tells us that the young son of Nebuchadnezzar
comes seriously ill. Nebuchadnezzar challenges Ben Sira to heal his child or suf-
r death. Ben Sira immediately proceeds to write an amulet with the names of the
aling angels in order to cure the child. Although amulets originated in antiquity,
eir reputation as protective agents was so firmly entrenched in popular belief that
e Hebrews unofficially adopted them. There were six types of amulets: those that
ere for general protective purposes; those that promote health; those that protect
ainst the evil eye; those that prevent miscarriages; those that promote fertility;
d those that protect mother and child in the childbed.

The story of Lilith comes as a response to Nebuchadnezzar's question to Ben
ra about the purpose and meaning of the amulet. Ben Sira's narrative describes
lith's creation from the same earthy substance as her illustrious male counterpart,
dam. Lilith rejects Adam's command to lie beneath him in the position of submis-
on during the act of sexual intercourse. Adam insists. Rather than submit to
dam's authority, Lilith pronounces the name of the Holy One and promptly flies
vay. Yahweh sends three angels to retrieve her with a promise that all will be for-
ven if she returns. If, however, she refuses to return, one hundred of her offspring
emons) will die every day as punishment for her disobedience.

The angels pursue Lilith and overtake her in the middle of the Red Sea. She
fuses Yahweh's offer but promises to refrain from inflicting illness and death on a
ild if the child wears a protective amulet with the angels' names. If, however, an
fant does not have the protection of the amulet, Lilith will have dominion over the
ild for eight days if it is a male, and for twenty days if it is a female. The sequence
events suggests that Lilith's decision to become a child-slayer emerges as a form
angry retaliation at Yahweh's decree that one hundred of her own offspring be
nihilated daily.

Lilith's repudiation of male authority and refusal to circumscribe her sexuality
patriarchal dictates has led to her rejection, degradation, vilification, and demon-
tion by Jewish orthodoxy. Her refusal to lie beneath Adam constitutes a chal-
nge to the prevailing sexual mores of the Hebrews. According to Jewish tradition,
woman who denies her spouse access to her body and/or who refuses to assume
e subservient position in frontal copulation commits the heinous crime of aban-
nment. Hence, whatever positive attributes she may possess immediately convert

to negative ones. Accordingly, Lilith is characterized as promiscuous, licentious, devious, and incorrigible. She is depicted as a fiery she-demon who is responsible for the seduction of wayward husbands, for the nocturnal emissions of men who sleep alone, for unbridled promiscuity, and for the killing of innocents.

It is important to note, however, that according to the *Alphabet,* Lilith is, indeed, created as Adam's equal. She is created simultaneously with Adam and is of the same earthy substance as he is. She interprets Adam's insistence that she lie beneath him as a form of tyranny. She is endowed with the power of voice and the power of agency. She is resourceful in that she flees Eden by pronouncing the Ineffable Name of God, indicating that she not only knows the Ineffable Name of God, but that she uses that knowledge to her advantage. She exercises choice by rejecting the offer to return to Eden—a choice that cements her repudiation of male authority. She refuses to compromise her autonomy. And she is prodigiously fertile.

The story of Lilith as told in the *Alphabet* has enjoyed a resurgence of interest in modern culture. Stripping her of the demonic aspects as promulgated in the Kabbalah and the Talmud, modern feminists embrace Lilith as a symbol of female empowerment. Lilith is reimaged as a sympathetic being who dares to challenge the patriarchal paradigm that systematically seeks to circumscribe her right—and the right of all women—to self-determination and autonomy. Because she is situated in a tradition that cannot or will not accommodate strong women, Lilith has been demonized by orthodoxy. She demands the freedom to move, to be herself, and to exercise her own choices. Lilith's position as Adam's first wife, her stubborn refusal to submit to male hegemony, her defiant struggle against oppression, and her unabashed sexuality contribute to perceptions of her as a role model for female autonomy, independence, equality, strength, and courage.

The selections of *The Alphabet of Ben Sira* are from *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives From Classical Hebrew Literature,* edited by David Stern and Mark J. Mirsky.

References

Cantor, Aviva. "Lilith, The Woman Who Would Be A Jew." *Which Lilith: Feminist Writers Re-Create The World's First Woman.* Eds. Enid Dame, Lilly Rivlin, and Henny Wenkart. New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1998. 17–22.

Dame, Enid, Lilly Rivlin, and Henny Wenkart, eds. *Which Lilith? Feminist Writers Re-Create The World's First Woman.* New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1998.

Koltuv, Barbara Black. *The Book of Lilith.* Maine: Nicolas-Hays, Inc., 1986.

Kvam, Kristen E., Linda Schearing, and Valarie H. Ziegler, eds. *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender.* Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1999.

Myers, Carol, General Ed., and Toni Craven and Ross S. Kraemer, Associate Eds. *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the*

Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament. Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2000.

The New Oxford Annotated Bible With the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books: New Revised Standard. 3rd ed. Ed. Michael D. Coogan. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001.

Patai, Raphael. *The Hebrew Goddess.* New Jersey: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1967.

Pereira, Filomena Maria. *Lilith: The Edge of Forever.* Texas: Ide House, 1998.

Plaskow, Judith. "Lilith Revisited (1995 C.E.)." *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender.* Ed. Kristen E. Kvam, Linda S. Schearing, and Valarie H. Ziegler. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999. 425–430.

Rivlin, Lilly. "Lilith." *Which Lilith: Feminist Writers Re-Create The World's First Woman.* Eds. Enid Dame, Lilly Rivlin, and Henny Wenkart. New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1998. 4–14.

Stern, David and Mark J. Mirsky, eds. *Rabbinic Fantasies: Imaginative Narratives From Classical Hebrew Literature.* New Haven: Yale UP, 1990.

The Alphabet of Ben Sira

V. Soon afterward the young son of the king took ill. Said Nebuchadnezzar, "Heal my son. If you don't, I will kill you." Ben Sira immediately sat down and wrote an amulet with the Holy Name, and he inscribed on it the angels in charge of medicine by their names, forms, and images, and by their wings, hands, and feet. Nebuchadnezzar looked at the amulet. "Who are these?"

"The angels who are in charge of medicine: Snvi, Snsvi, and Smnglof. After God created Adam, who was alone, He said, 'It is not good for man to be alone' (Genesis 2:18). He then created a woman for Adam, from the earth, as He had created Adam himself, and called her Lilith. Adam and Lilith immediately began to fight. She said, 'I will not lie below,' and he said, 'I will not lie beneath you, but only on top. For you are fit only to be in the bottom position, while I am to be in the superior one.' Lilith responded, 'We are equal to each other inasmuch as we were both created from the earth.' But they would not listen to one another. When Lilith saw this, she pronounced the Ineffable Name and flew away into the air. Adam stood in prayer before his Creator: 'Sovereign of the universe!' he said, 'the woman you gave me has run away.' At once, the Holy One, blessed be He, sent these three angels to bring her back.

"Said the Holy One to Adam, 'If she agrees to come back, fine. If not, she must permit one hundred of her children to die every day.' The angels left God and pursued Lilith, whom they overtook in the midst of the sea, in the mighty waters wherein the Egyptians were destined to drown. They told her God's word, but she did not wish to return. The angels said, 'We shall drown you in the sea.'

" 'Leave me!' she said. 'I was created only to cause sickness to infants. If the infant is male, I have dominion over him for eight days after his birth, and if female, for twenty days.'

"When the angels heard Lilith's words, they insisted she go back. But she swore to them by the name of the living and eternal God: 'Whenever I see you or your names or your forms in an amulet, I will have no power over that infant.' She also agreed to have one hundred of her children die every day. Accordingly, every day one hundred demons perish, and for the same reason, we write the angels' names on the amulets of young children. When Lilith sees their names, she remembers her oath, and the child recovers."

Questions for Review and Discussion

1. Ben Sira's miraculous conception identifies him with figures in other religious traditions who experience a similar miraculous conception. Can you identify any such figures? How is their conception similar to and different from the conception of Ben Sira?
2. According to the *Alphabet,* Lilith is created as Adam's equal and is made of the same earthy substance as he is. Why does Adam insist that she lie beneath him?
3. Why does Lilith take such issue with adopting the subordinate position during sexual intercourse? In what ways might her concern reflect something larger than just who assumes what position during copulation?
4. Why was Lilith rejected, demonized, and vilified by later rabbinic scholars? What is it about her that poses such a threat to their beliefs?
5. The image of Lilith as projected by rabbinic scholars fuels a climate of distrust against a certain type of woman. What type of woman is being censured through the condemnation of Lilith?
6. What can you derive about Lilith's attributes by analyzing her conduct? In what ways might she be perceived as a threat to women?
7. How might the demonic characterization of Lilith serve the interests of a male-dominant ideology whose goals are to keep women divided and subordinate to males?
8. What qualities does Lilith demonstrate that can lead to her reimaging as a role model for feminists?
9. Are you familiar with *Lilith Fair: A Celebration of Women in Music?* If so, why do you think the founders of *Lilith Fair* chose the name of Lilith for their festival?